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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000142

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE SY IS

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEW FOREIGN MINISTRY SECRETARY GENERAL

EXPLAINS LEBANESE-SYRIAN RELATIONSHIP

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 1/26 meeting, Ambassador Hicham Dimachkieh, the new Secretary General in the Foreign Ministry, discussed the factors which complicate Lebanon's relationship with its powerful and often obtuse neighbor. Exhibiting the caution of a diplomat who worked for many years in Syrian-dominated governments, Dimachkieh advised that while Lebanon would insist on its sovereignty, consideration had to be given to Syria's traditional influence and basic inability to understand democratic norms. Dimachkieh said he was not surprised by yesterday's violent Sunni-Shia clashes and cautioned that such events would recur unless a comprehensive political compromise were reached. He also emphasized that regional developments, particularly movement in the Middle East peace process, could dramatically improve the chances for the forces of moderation and democracy in Lebanon and the region. Finally, he noted the vast difference between yesterday's outpouring of international assistance at the Paris III conference -- for which he thanked U.S. leadership -- and the chaotic scenes of violence in central Beirut. He agreed with the Ambassador that the vast majority of Lebanese, if given the choice, would vote overwhelmingly for peace and stability. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Dimachkieh is a Sunni whose family originally came from Saudi Arabia and Syria before settling in Lebanon. He was recently appointed to the number two position in the ministry. He met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on January 26, one day after serious Shia-Sunni clashes in southern districts of the city left four dead and more than 100 injured. Ambassador Dimachkieh came to his post from an ambassadorial assignment in Berlin. He was noticeably reserved in his comments concerning the current political situation. (Note: As a Sunni whose cousin works directly for PM Siniora, Dimachkieh, we would guess, probably shares March 14 views but expresses them cautiously, after decades of work in the Syria-dominated MFA. End note.)

TALE OF TWO CITIES

¶3. (C) Dimachkieh expressed deep appreciation, not only for the "extraordinary" assistance package announced at Paris III, but for the leadership the U.S. has shown in gathering international support for Lebanon's struggling democracy. He agreed with the Ambassador that the stark contrast between the spirit of cooperation and support displayed in Paris with

images of Shia and Sunni youths rampaging in south-central Beirut was nearly incomprehensible. The career diplomat said he understand the sectarian tension that has been generated by decades of poverty and misunderstanding. He also believed that a sense of frustration now so prevalent in the "Arab street" played a critical role, because it breeds a misguided sense that only violence and radical agendas can be effective agents of change.

¶ 14. (C) Amb. Dimachkiah assured us that the vast majority of Lebanese would choose the vision of Lebanon portrayed by PM Siniora in Paris, but after decades of "overbearing outside interference" the Lebanese people lacked self-confidence. He concurred that "some political leaders" had deliberately and cynically raised sectarian tensions to help them achieve political goals, but he almost painfully avoided assigning responsibility. All thinking Lebanese, he contended, understand that the democratic process is the only logical way to solve the country's long-standing problems. Almost all Lebanese remember the devastation of the country's long civil war and strive to avoid a return to those times.

¶ 15. (C) Interestingly, he also stated that yesterday's violence just might produce some progress. Perhaps the realization that the international community was ready and willing to assist Lebanon would make yesterday's violence appear that much more senseless and self-defeating. Dimachkiah also pointed out that the violence demonstrated that the institutions of a democratic state, especially its security forces, were critical to the protection of its citizenry and had to be encouraged and supported. He conceded that the LAF in particular had come up lacking in Tuesday's violence and had initially appeared hesitant to separate the opposing groups of students yesterday. They

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improved their performance later in the afternoon and enforced effectively last night's emergency curfew. The diplomat said he was cautiously confident that the security services would continue to improve and regain the respect of Lebanon's citizens.

RATIONALIZES LEBANON'S CAUTION ON SYRIAN RELATIONS

¶ 16. (C) Describing Lebanon as a small country in a dangerous neighborhood, Dimachkiah argued that his country had to exercise caution with its unpredictable and headstrong neighbor. He used historical developments that occurred at the founding of his country to explain (and perhaps rationalize) Syria's obsession in trying to control Lebanon's destiny. Although he emphasized that Lebanon's sovereignty and independence were inviolable, he admitted that he "partly understood" the obtuseness of the Syrian regime in not according Lebanon the international respect it deserved. In effect, Dimachkiah asked for patience as Lebanon worked in its own way to establish normal bilateral relations with Syria.

¶ 17. (C) Dimachkiah also addressed the growing regional influence of Iran and once again exhibited an attitude that veered dangerously close to accommodation. He said that because of its history, Iran had expectations that its views would be carefully considered by other nations in the region, but once again quickly added that national self-determination was paramount.

¶ 18. (C) As other interlocutors have recently argued, the new Secretary General maintained that any movement on the Middle

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East peace process would have enormous benefits in Lebanon and the region, particularly because it would include a satisfactory resolution of the long-festering issue of Palestinian refugees. This, he continued, would remove the primary irritant in Middle East relations. He was convinced

that settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would remove a critical weapon from Islamic extremists, whose violence and influence was steadily spreading in the region. Feeling that the time was right, Dimachkieh earnestly requested the U.S. to dedicate its considerable influence to push this effort as fast as possible.

LEBANON'S AMBASSADOR TO LEBANON

¶9. (U) In response to an earlier inquiry, Amb. Dimachkieh said paperwork for Lebanon's Ambassador-designate to the U.S., Antoine Chedid, is nearly complete. He said the official decree that appoints Ambassador Chedid has already been signed by Foreign Minister Salloukh and Finance Minister Azour (as required by Lebanese law), and is now on the desk of Prime Minister Siniora. Amb. Dimachkieh believes it will be signed by Siniora this weekend and would be on the desk of President Emile Lahoud (the final signature required) sometime next week.

¶10. (U) Dimachkieh is confident President Lahoud will sign the decree because it is contained in a package of seven ambassadorial appointments coming to his desk. All the assignments had been made before the Shia ministerial walk-out on November 11. The Foreign Ministry understands that time is running short to complete the appointment in time for the next credentials ceremony at the White House.

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